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Empowering Our Ministry: We Are God's Raw Material

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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CPC 9/17/00

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As I said last week, the Lord whom we worship preached the Good News of salvation AND demonstrated the presence of the kingdom of God. We are called to do both tasks. And *just as Jesus did while on earth, incarnated as the God-Man,* we need to listen - to discern the WILL and the WHEN of the Father. Now that Jesus has ascended to once again sit at the right hand of the Father, as He (Jesus) had eternally sat, we pray to God (three persons, one God = the trinity) in our listening. We want to know the mind of Jesus, that is, the will of God, what God wants us to do in any given moment. But we also pray to discover the 'when' of God's own choosing, that is, the kairos moment when God brings together circumstances and people, in the context of nurtured Christ-centered faith, to manifest His presence, and do something incredible. This morning I want to talk about the steps by which this dynamic of God's activity takes place, and then to illustrate using the passage from Ezekiel 37.

Our role can be broken into six steps. The first step is to maintain ourselves in an intimate prayer relationship with God, so that we may know the mind of our Lord. This is key. I have said before and will say again that the first work of ministry is prayer. We can't know the mind of God, His will, let alone the 'when' of God's timing, if we are not in prayer with our Lord. Remember the wonderful image from Revelation 3, how God stands at the door and knocks, asking His people to let Him in. This image is priceless because it shows that God is gracious. God will not barge down the door. God requests our involvement in ministry, we must decide to and then open the door. This is what we do in prayer.

The second step is to receive the Spirit 'upon' for power. The spiritual gifts available to all Christians of which I have spoken, the ones listed in the New Testament as well as the Old Testament, are God's power equipment tools for ministry. How many of you own a screwdriver? How many of you have used it? Ok. Now, how many of you have tried an electric or battery powered screwdriver? Great, isn't it! You can accomplish more, you can get more done, you can be more effective. This is what spiritual gifts are all about, this is what receiving the power of the Holy Spirit is all about. Now I want to add that sometimes there is much made of spiritual gifts, and they are over-emphasized. Sometimes people with certain spiritual gifts think that their gift is better than someone else's gift, or that one particular gift is always the evidence of the presence of the power of the Holy Spirit. As I have said, this kind of teaching is hogwash. As a matter of fact, the Scripture is clear that the mark of spiritual, of Christian maturity, are the *fruit of the Spirit*, you know, love and joy and peace and patience and self-control, and the others, the ones listed in Galatians 5. The *gifts of the Spirit* are God's gracious power equipment tools that we are to use to do ministry, and most specifically, to build up the body of Christ, SO THAT this body can be effective in bringing glory to Jesus Christ.

The third step is to prepare the right context for God's activity by nurturing Christ-centered faith. We are not magicians, nor are we involved in 'New Age' spirituality. The power of God manifests in the context of a faith dedicated to Jesus of Nazareth, whom we believe to be the Messiah (Greek = 'Christ') of God. We prepare this Christ-centered context by having sound doctrine, by being in prayer, by holding one another accountable to the Word of God, and by pursuing the fruit of the Spirit in

our daily lives.

The fourth step is to discern - *to look for* - the presence and movement of the Holy Spirit. We need to seek *and expect to receive* guidance about what God is hoping to accomplish. There are different signs and there isn't one single indication that God is doing something in our midst. Yet, we must continue to look for the Spirit, and have an expectation, which is also a willingness to be used by God.

The fifth step is that, in obedience, we need to speak or act out what the Holy Spirit is saying. We need to be the willing raw material of God. If you have the spiritual gift of being a prophet at CPC, you may receive a Word from the Lord that you should speak to the assembled body at a particular time. Will you? You have the choice not to speak, but if you do not, you may be acting in disobedience. You may have the spiritual gift of exhortation, and you may walk into a room and have the sense from God, who places this notion in your head, that you should walk over to that person and encourage her. You might say to yourself, wait a minute! I don't know that person, I don't know what to say!, even though knowing what to say or knowing the person or their circumstance isn't necessary to your act of obedience. You may have the gift of administration, and be called to help out some ministry team in on going ministry efforts, or some short-term team, on a one-time project, and you might choose to be disobedient and not help. Since our Lord is standing outside the door when we are inside, and He is knocking (nudging you to act or speak), we all have the choice not to open the door, not to let Him come in. This is the dynamic - we are God's raw material, this is the way God typically does things. If we won't be used by God, if we say 'no', then something God would otherwise have done does not get accomplished.

If there is a sixth step, it follows from what I have said. When we speak or act in the context of faith (either our faith or the faith of another person in the situation), God's power gets manifested, in a variety of ways. It's an awesome place to be when this comes together!

What was happening in Ezekiel 37, in this famous vision of the valley of dry bones? Well, the Spirit of God was moving over the situation. Just as the Spirit moved, or 'hovered,' or 'brooded', over the creation before a word of command, a word of creation, was spoken, at the beginning of our world, just so, the Spirit was moving over this situation. It was a kairos moment developing. Into this context, the Spirit brought Ezekiel - notice he didn't show up on his own, he was brought there by the Holy Spirit. He was brought there because God wants to work through him and because he is, after all, a prophet to God's people, a people who are in bondage and without hope and faith, so Ezekiel has a purpose to reveal to his people these words of God.

This is very cool. Note that God invites and commands Ezekiel's participation. God asks Ezekiel and extraordinary question: 'Can these bones live?' Now, I'm with Ezekiel here - I want to say, well, ah, hmm, gosh, well, you know, O God! But there's something important here not to be missed. *And that is that God's question shows that God intends Ezekiel to be part of the answer.*

In the face of another impossible situation, Jesus once asked his disciples a similar unnerving question: 'How many loaves have you? How many fish?' 5000 people are nearby, listening to Jesus late in the day, and Jesus asks an extraordinary question of the disciples - *and in this question too is the invitation to participate in a kairos moment, in an extraordinary answer.* Similar questions may come to us: Can this man be healed? Can these people hear the Gospel? Can this marriage be restored?

Can there be justice in our land? Can we reach the WA with the Gospel? Can renewal come to our church?

I believe God has given us dominion over the earth. He has made us responsible and has given us the commission to take the Gospel to the whole world. He calls, commands and invites our participation in His works. In being asked the impossible question, we are invited to participation in the miraculous answer!

Obviously, it's impossible for Ezekiel to either raise the dead in the valley of dry bones, or restore hope and faith to the people of Israel. Both Ezekiel and God know this. But God tells Ezekiel what to say - *and Ezekiel says it*. This piece is so important ... this obedience. This spoken word IS the raw material that the Spirit of God lays hold of to create the new reality. The bones come together and become new life. The people of Israel are restored to living faith.

As I said, this is an awesome place to be! God chooses you to be sent, to speak or act. When united with the Spirit of God, God's purpose is accomplished. We ARE God's raw material. But ... do you want to be? Nothing will happen if we don't begin in prayer, if we don't discipline ourselves to develop intimacy with God so as to be aware of the 'will' and the 'when' of God's moving. First and foremost, prayer is the first work of ministry!

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